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ABSTRACT

The paper provides guidelines for the classroom teacher in making effective referrals for special education services. The three phases of the referral process are delineated: (1) identification of the problem, (2) documentation/intervention, and (3) the activation of screening and staffing teams. Detailed suggestions for conducting the activities in phase two of the referral process are provided. Documentation/intervention includes observations of students' behavior, conferences concerning the identified problem, and both preventive and remedial interventions. (Author/CL)

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What's A Teacher To Do? A Referral Process For Special Education Services

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to provide guidelines for the classroom teacher in making effective referrals for special education services. The three phases of the referral process are delineated:

(1) Identification of the problem,

(2) documentation/intervention, and

(3) screening and staffing teams.

Detailed suggestions for conducting the activities in phase two of the referral process are provided.

What's A Teacher To Do?
A Referral Process for Special Education Services

Breanna accurately completes her work before all the students and asks, "What's next?", Alfonso won't stay in his seat, Clinton talks out in class, Holli never completes her homework assignments, Cason still says "wabbit" for "rabbit", Tyler doesn't fit in even the lowest reading group, Brittany writes b for d, Tara says "four letter words" all the time and Jonathan never follows directions. What's a teacher to do?

In every classroom, there are children as described above. The teacher may feel these students could be better educated within a special education class. The purpose of this paper is to provide guidelines for the classroom teacher in making effective referrals for special education services. A flow chart, (Fig. I), depicts a referral process for special education services. The three phases of the flow chart delineate steps to assist in confirming the observations of the student and in making the appropriate placement.

Identification of Problem

Phase I of the flow chart presents guidelines for the teacher in identification of the student's problem. In identifying the student's problem, the teacher must be careful to clearly specify the behavior being observed. For example, the statement, "Tony is lazy", doesn't clearly specify the exact problem, but the statements, "Tony does not complete his assignments, Tony turns in work which is inaccurate due to carelessness and is sloppy in presentation, and Tony wastes time and is unorganized in starting and completing a task", are more specific in pinpointing the problem to be observed. The teacher should also be careful not to label the student, but rather to identify the student's problem.

The teacher should also observe the student's behavior in both structured and non-structured settings, as well as academic and non-academic settings. For instance, in an academic setting, the teacher could use error pattern analysis on the student's work in pinpointing an academic problem. This involves looking for a repeated pattern of errors, such as the student who continually misses addition problems with regrouping because of adding left to right, rather than right to left. This is a frequent error many teachers overlook in math classes, especially when a tasksheet involves addition problems with or without regrouping. Problems without regrouping would have the correct answers, even if added left to right, but those with regrouping would be incorrect. The student could know the basic addition math facts, but because of doing the process incorrectly, the student misses the answers with regrouping.

In order for the teacher to more clearly identify the problem, the teacher may consult with the school guidance counselors and/or other support services, such as a reading specialist or psychologist. Further observation by the counselor and/or support service representative at scheduled times would help to determine if a significant problem exists. Parental involvement might also help in identifying the existance of a problem, because in some instances, the parents can give probable causes for the student's behavior. Parents often can serve as a key in finding a solution.

To provide a structured approach and concrete evidence of the identified problem, many screening checklists are available. Most school districts provide an adopted checklist. These checklists usually consist of a frequency rating of items, such as, learns faster than others with fewer repetitions, verbally aggressive, clumsy and uncoordinated, difficulty remembering written messages, and withdrawn behavior. Upon completion of the checklist, a pattern usually begins to emerge. This information can be amplified with cumulative folder data such as grades, past school history and teacher anecdotal records.

At the conclusion of the steps involved in Phase I, the teacher would feel confident in stating, with specificity, the nature of the problem. The information accumulated in Phase I would lead up to Phase II, documentation and intervention.

Documentation/Intervention

Phase II of the flow chart presents detailed suggestions for conducting three of the major activities in the referral process: observations, conferences, and interventions. The regular classroom teacher is directly involved in these critical prereferral activities. In most cases, the prereferral process requires that documentation be provided to show that a minimum number of observations of the specific problem were conducted in the classroom, that conferences concerning the problem were held, and that interventions designed to deal with the problem were attempted.

Observations

The classroom teacher is required to document observations of behavior in conducting prereferral requirements. Checklists are used to pinpoint academic, behavioral, communicative, physical, and social/affective patterns of behavior. Frequently, other school personnel will also observe the student for specificity in identifying the problem.

Teachers should also be observant of a student's normal speech and language development and can, with the use of a simple articulation checklist, as well as observing phonic reading instruction, identify common problems. Identification of giftedness in students should also be observed by the teacher. Recognition should be given to identifying culturally different gifted students underachieving gifted students. In identifying gifted students, teachers should be aware that a straight A student is not always gifted and that a C student could possibly be gifted.

The most convenient method a teacher can use to measure problem behavior is to observe it directly in the school setting. There should be a systematic way to record the behavior. By analyzing the record of the student's behavior over a period of tiem, the teacher may learn that the behavior occurs in certain situations or at certain periods of the day or that every occurrence of the problem behavior is preceded or followed by a particular set of circumstances.

The behavior to be recorded must be identified in specific terms. For example, misbehavior is to general. Fighting and pulling Chad's hair are specific behaviors to observe. If a teacher suspects a behavior occurs only when certain students are around, observations must also take place at that time. Other aspects of the school environment must also be considered, such as nonstructured times which would include entering class, transitions between classes, lunch time, and non-academic classes, such as physical education, music and art.

Conferences

Following documentation of observations to identify the problem, the teacher is then required to conduct conferences concerning the student's identified problem. The primary purpose of these conferences is to attempt to successfully resolve the student's specific problem within the present school placment. The conferences also give the school an opportunity to meet with the parents and gain information in an attempt to deal with the problem. Conferences with parents should be held in a manner that will increase the probability that an effective educational program can be developed. This goal is based upon the assumption that (a) parents should be active participants in the educational process and that (b) it is the role of professional educators to include them in this process. Subsequent group conferences are frequently necessary to resolve issues that were identified in the parent-teacher sessions and to cooperatively develop a plan to deal with the problem. Shared planning usually results in a better plan, and greater commitment from those involved.

The participants in these cinferences usually include, but are not limited to, the parents or guardian, the student's teacher or teachers, one or more administrative personnel, the guidance counselor and the student, if appropriate. While the number of participants, format, and content of a conference varies according to the individual student's needs, there are several common elements in all conference. First of all, a record should be made of the date and time of the conference. Second, the names of the participants in the conference should be recorded. Third, a brief description of the topic and recommendations should be written. Finally, an evaluation should be written on the effectiveness of the actions taken with documented outcomes based on the written recommendations. Most school districts provide a brief form that can be used to document the conferences.

Interventions

In an effort to help resolve, remediate or compensate the student's individual needs, educational interventions or strategies need to be formally documented before final acceptance by a screening and staffing team. These interventions should be on-going.

Educational interventions are often the neglected aspect in both the referral and regular educational process. All teachers are faced with a myriad of learning problems, academic an/or behvior, and it is apparent that if educational needs of all children (P.L. 94-142) are to be met, tehn all teachers must becomeskillful in instruction of children with learning problems. Teachers need a mastery of specific teaching techniques to insure a holistic approach to education, which is essential to conducting truly individualized instruction for all students, regardless of the span of individual differences encountered.

Teachers should use a practical approach which includes both preventive and remedial interventions. In general, most teachers can recognize which students need help, but often, they do not know how to plan to meet the needs identified. Guidebooks with suggested interventions are to be used as stepping

stones, they should not be considered comprehensive or boundless. Guidebooks are valuable in that they provide step by step suggestions in what to do , but in dealing with the human element, it is important that one option not considered the panacea for any problem, because each child and each situation is unique and different.

Some strategies take very little time, while others require a great deal more effort and time and possibly support help. It is recognized that time and effort are premiums very valuable to a teacher, however, teacher frustration is often reduced when an initial investment of time is given to meet a student's needs. The willingness and ability to individualize instructions are perhaps the most crucial aspects which reflect a teacher's attitudes and perceptions, knowledge of curriculum and their mastery of a broad repertoire of instructional approaches and materials.

In implementing any intervention or strategy technique, teachers should realize the importance of first laying the foundation for a positive teaching/learning situation. This foundation is built upon a relationship which communicates empathy, warmth, respect and genuiness...an understanding and belief in the fundamental worth of each student being helped. Choosing the correct intervention to help a student is more of an art than a science, often trial and error are necessary in the attainment of success. But with a stron foundation, a few stepping stones and continued evaluation, the teacher and student can hopefully overcome.

Knowing the cause(s) of a student's problem can expedite the strategy prescribed for a particular student and should not be overlooked in the referral process. For example, a child may fail to stay on task for various reason: (1) task difficulty - break task down into smaller developmental units; (2) gradually increasing the difficulty; (3) short attention span - concise, short assignments to be completed within a specified time frame; (4) failure to understand written directions - provide step by step format, paraphrase orally; (5) fatigue -

provide brief rest period; (6) inability to concentrate due to an emotional upset - individual conference with emphasis on active listening. The list of causes can be infinite, but knowing the cause may help in pinpointing guidelines for choosing strategies on a trial and error basis. One strategy can be implemented successfully to counteract a problem with two or more very different simultaneous causes, or two or more problems with the same cause, and often the strategy is a reversal of the cause itself.

Following observation, conferences, and interventions, the teacher may be required to complete additional referral forms provided by the school districts. Among the forms frequently required are parental permission for psychological assessment and filling out a social history and academic history form. Usually, at this point, the completion of the referral process is the responsibility of school personnel other than the teachers.

Screening and Staffing Teams

Screening and staffing teams are activated in Phase III. The screening and staffing team approach is used to facilitate movement of exception students from identification, evaluation to program implementation and to assist teachers in becoming facilitative in the child centered process. The general goal is to provide direct services in the identification, evaluation and program implementation process. Other goals are to provide strategies and resources to aid in the assessment and evaluation process, to correlate individualized alternative intervention strategies to simplify the ongoing instructional program, and to provide in-class consultation. In addition, teacher inservice workshops, parent skills training and other supportive services may be provided. Community agencies may be utilized as problems arise.

The next step is to conduct psycho-educational evaluations. Evaluation results are analyzed and interpreted. These evaluation results are used to devise and implement further diagnostic objectives, divise placement recommendations and follow-up plan, determine related services needed, devise a change

plan, organize and evaluate all diagnostic information, and to form diagnostic conclusions.

If eligibility criteria for exceptional education placement and related services are met, then an IEP conference is scheduled to determine both long and short term objectives and to arrange for necessary related services.

Summary

A model for referrals has been presented. What's a teacher to do? For an effective referral, the teacher must be specific in identifying the problem. Observations, conferences, and interventions should also be conducted in an attempt to solve the problem in the classroom. If the problem persists, further evaluation is required. This may involve many other people in the school and community. The coordination of each step requires time, which may be longer than the teacher anticipates. But the decision to identify a child as needing special education services is not to be taken lightly. This model may help to expedite the process.